

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS WINTER USE PLAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Q: Why is the National Park Service (NPS) doing another Winter Use Plan and Environmental Impact Statement?

A: Two previous decisions about winter use were sent back to the NPS for further work by federal courts. As a result, the NPS prepared a temporary winter use plan, which is in effect through the winter of 2006-2007. The temporary winter use plan is intended to provide certainty to park visitors, communities, and the public about winter use for an interim period, while the NPS prepares a long-term plan on winter use. This long-term plan and EIS will provide for the management of winter use beginning with the winter of 2007-2008. The long-term plan will allow the NPS to address the courts' concerns.

Q: How do the different court rulings affect this plan? What is the legal current status?

A: One of the purposes of this long-term plan is to address the deficiencies identified by the U.S. District Courts for the Districts of Columbia and Wyoming in their rulings.

Two current lawsuits pertain to the temporary winter use plan and EA. The Fund for Animals sued over the issue of bison use of groomed roads in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. The group, Save Our Snowplanes, sued over the ban on snowplanes on Jackson Lake in Grand Teton. That suit was filed in Wyoming.

A third suit, by the Wyoming Lodging and Restaurant Association (joined by the State of Wyoming) was filed over guiding and annual limits. The U.S. District Court in Cheyenne found in favor of the National Park Service in October, but has retained jurisdiction over the issue, pending completion of the new long term plan.

The U.S Department of Justice petitioned The Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation to consolidate the winter use lawsuits in one court. The Panel denied the petition. This means that current legal actions regarding the temporary winter use plan will proceed.

Other questions about the legal aspects of this issue can best be answered by the Department of Justice at 202-514-2007.

Q: Won't this be another waste of time and money when this decision could, once more be overturned?

A: The National Park Service has always looked at the winter use planning process as an opportunity to learn more and to provide for the highest level of resource protection and a high quality visitor experience—that's exactly what has occurred throughout this process and will continue to occur. We now have an opportunity to analyze new monitoring data gathered during the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 winter seasons on air quality, visibility, natural soundscapes, employee and visitor health and safety, water quality, and visitor experiences.

Q: What did we learn from this past winter?

A: The winters of 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 were markedly different from previous winters, with an average of 259 snowmobiles entering Yellowstone each day during January and February 2004 and about 240 per day entered Yellowstone in 2005. Also, all snowmobilers in Yellowstone were led by commercial guides, and in the winter of 2004-2005, all recreational snowmobiles met the NPS' best available technology (BAT) requirements.

Also, the drought conditions of the past several years continued. In the 2004-2005 season, the road from Madison Junction to Old Faithful was closed to oversnow vehicles 20 of 83 days due to lack of snow or poor snow conditions.

The Temporary Winter Use Plan Environmental Assessment is allowing the parks to gather additional data that will be critical in helping us understand the differences between strictly limited snowmobile use (limited numbers, best available technology, and guided) and historical unlimited snowmobile use. This monitoring data will be fundamental to accurately assess the impacts of winter use in the long-term analysis and planning.

Q: Aren't you tired of all this winter planning?

A: We recognize that winter planning has been underway for many years, and has had its share of changes of directions. We admire and appreciate employee, public, gateway community and other stakeholders' participation with us over the last three National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes related to winter use since 1998. Our winter use team understands it may be hard for many individuals, groups and government agencies to step up and actively participate again.

The 2000 and 2003 decisions have been vacated by the courts. The temporary plan allows for snowmobile and snowcoach use through the winter of 2006-2007.

Preparation of a new long-term plan is necessary and must be completed for the parks to remain open for winter access in the long term.

Q: Do you believe snowmobiles are appropriate in Yellowstone National Park?

A: Yes, under an appropriate management regime. Throughout this process our goals have not changed, nor has our commitment to achieving them. Winter use must be one of shared stewardship. We will work closely with our local governments and businesses, concessioners, conservation and other interest groups, industry, park visitors and the public to build a sustainable future that will allow for both snowmobile and snowcoach use while preserving park resources and providing a high quality visitor experience. Successful implementation will require the hard work and cooperation of all interests.

Q: What is the purpose of the situation assessment produced by Cadence, Inc?

A: To better involve the public, non-governmental organizations, and cooperating agencies, the NPS contracted with Nedra Chandler, of Cadence, Inc., to conduct a series of interviews with various stakeholders. The situation assessment is based on these interviews and was used to help design a workable [public engagement plan](#).

Q: What is the EIS schedule?

A: Public scoping was completed September 1, 2005. Scoping is an opportunity early in a planning and EIS process for the public, organizations, and other agencies to suggest issues and alternatives that should be considered by the NPS in preparing a plan and EIS.

A scoping report is being prepared by a contractor and will be completed and posted to the Yellowstone winter use planning web page in November.

The NPS intends to make a draft EIS and a proposed rule available for public review in Spring 2006. A final EIS, followed by a Record of Decision and a final regulation, would be completed in Summer 2007.

Q: Will there be cooperating agencies in the EIS process?

A: The NPS has invited several other government agencies to participate in the development of the EIS as cooperating agencies, including the states of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho; the counties of Park and Teton, Wyoming, Gallatin and Park, Montana, and Fremont, Idaho; the Environmental Protection Agency; and the U.S. Forest Service. Cooperating agency status allows these government entities to share information that will be useful to the NPS as the EIS

is prepared. However, the NPS is ultimately responsible for the development and content of the EIS, and the NPS will be the decision-maker about winter use in the parks.

Q: How is the NPS addressing the road grooming issue?

A: To help address the question of road grooming, the NPS commissioned Dr. Cormack Gates and his colleagues at the University of Calgary to prepare the report: [“The Ecology of Bison Movements and Distribution in and beyond Yellowstone National Park: A Critical Review With Implications for Winter Use and Transboundary Population Management.”](#)

Dr. Cormack Gates is an internationally recognized expert on bison ecology and management. Dr. Gates has extensive experience in conservation science and has facilitated work with a number of academic institutions and government agencies on a variety of conservation issues. For these reasons, and because he and his team lacked previous association with issues related to Yellowstone National Park bison ecology or winter use management, they were able to assess the state of knowledge and adaptive management from an independent perspective.

The report provides a thorough and independent assessment of the scientifically derived evidence concerning the importance, influence, and effects of winter road grooming and other factors on bison ecology in Yellowstone National Park.

The assessment also responds to a December 16, 2003, opinion by the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia that conflicting science exists concerning the issue of how groomed roads influence bison movement during the winter.

Q: How was the Gates’ report conducted?

A: The team reviewed and analyzed relevant published and unpublished scientific literature concerning importance, influence, and effects of environmental factors, including groomed roads on bison population and spatial ecology. They interviewed key informants on bison ecology, conducted public and technical scoping workshops with experts and non-government organizations, and did bison population dynamics and distribution modeling based on key informant interviews, workshops, and the literature.

The study began in June 2004, and the final report was made available to the public in June 2005.

Q: What are the primary findings of the study?

- Yellowstone National Park includes multiple primary bison habitat ranges and connecting corridors that represent suitable year-round habitat for a bison population and supports the population's ability to increase in abundance.
- Road grooming has not induced bison range expansion, although roads facilitate bison movements within and between winter ranges where aligned with natural movement corridors.
- The road segment between Madison and Norris is the one road segment that is not aligned with a natural movement corridor, providing a movement pathway between the central and northern bison ranges in the park.
- Road grooming has not changed bison population growth rates compared to the period prior to intensive road grooming.

Q: What recommendations do Gates and his colleagues offer?

- Implement a population monitoring program that contributes data in the long term on population size, annual rates of increase, calf production and yearling recruitment, and winter distribution.
- Define a minimum viable bison population for the Northern Range.
- Increase efforts to obtain agreements to secure winter range for bison adjacent to the park in the Northern range.
- Design a management experiment to evaluate the local effects of road grooming on bison movement between Madison Junction and Norris Geyser Basin.

Q: Does the park agree with the report?

A: This is a comprehensive and independent report that embraces, considers and reflects the multiple positions of this complex issue. The report will be helpful in implementing bison research and management and will be used in the analysis section of the long-term winter use plan and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Q: Will there be road closures as the result of the study's findings?

A: The EIS will look at a wide range of alternatives, including an alternative(s) with various road segments left ungroomed. This will allow the NPS to fully analyze the impacts of road grooming on wildlife.

Q: Will the park revisit the Interagency Bison Management Plan and how bison activities are handled in the park?

A: The Interagency Bison Management Plan already has an adaptive management component that allows the National Park Service to incorporate new knowledge about the effects of road grooming and adjust management activities when appropriate; therefore there is no need to reconsider the IBMP.